

Out of Danger Surfing

How to Protect Yourself and Your Children Online

By: Julia Sorokina

While researching material for these articles each week on the Internet, we often find ourselves feeling violated by the language and content of sites that appear in the middle of perfectly innocent searches. It's bad enough for adults, but it could also happen to children doing the same searches for their school papers. The problem seems to be getting more pervasive as the Net expands to tens of millions of sites. Even the advertising banners on otherwise harmless pages is sometimes of questionable propriety. What, if anything, can we do about it?



Well, we all DO have the option of simply pulling the plug. But that means we have to give up our online vacation maps and instant news and stock quotes and all the great material for school papers. Shut off the opportunity for exploring and collaborating and you cut yourself and your children off from some of the richest educational and entertainment resources available. In the virtual world that is emerging, we need to be able to tap this wealth, but not at the expense of exposing ourselves to a steady barrage of offensive language, images and come-ons.

Perhaps the public library is a good model of what might be more effective. There is a wide variety of material, but it is categorized. We trust that when we go to the shelves marked for computer books that we'll find just those and not books with mature themes. The same is true in bookstores. The children's section in Barnes and Noble is as advertised, and it's safe to let your kids read there. The common denominator is that a librarian or bookseller is moderating the experience. Imagine the chaos you'd have if authors could walk in and place their books anywhere they felt like. You'd have no idea what you'd come upon next.

I see a trend developing on the Internet to put the same type of organizational structure in place. The Internet community has always prided itself on personal responsibility and self-policing rather than stifling bureaucracy or the rule of government law. In addition to robots that simply index anything and everything out there, directories are emerging that are reviewed and controlled by editors who guarantee to have the type of content they promote.

Yahoo is the oldest and largest human compiled directory, but it also displays millions of uncategorized web pages. Years ago, they had a special area for children called Yahoooligans. Today there are other resources that you'll find in the list of related sites below.

About.com, formerly The Mining Company, has 700 different categories, each moderated by a volunteer editor interested in that particular topic. You can suggest additions to the site, but it is strictly the editor's choice of what gets offered.

The next step in safe surfing was OneKey, a search engine designed specifically to protect children, although the material is not focused on juvenile sites. Every site is inspected by a person prior to approval. Jim Perkins, who runs OneKey, has an editorial policy that filters out all of the sites on the Net that do not meet Network TV Standards. There are currently over 500 categories of sites in the database, such as business, entertainment, government, library, lifestyles, technology, sports as well as education related.

While specially compiled directories are a step in the right direction, your best solution to protecting yourself and your children today is probably a combination of actions. Certainly, you'll want to bookmark and use directories and web sites, such as A Positive Light (now JohnShepler.com), that prove themselves to have your interests at heart. You may also wish to install site blocking software such as Net Nanny or SafeSurf on your computer. Many objectionable sites are blocked, along with search words that most parents find offensive. The software can also be set to prevent children from entering chat rooms and reading postings to message boards.

Another easy solution is to build a table of web sites that you and your children enjoy visiting, by creating your own web page. Once you build a favorite links web page using web authoring software such as Adobe Dream Weaver or Microsoft FrontPage, make it your default browser page. You can even upload it and have it available to family and friends online, if you wish. The nice feature of doing this is that your browser HOME button will always bring up your own list of approved links.

Unfortunately, all of the technical solutions will never replace parental responsibility. Just like parents have always taught their kids not to talk to strangers, it's important that kids today understand that there is danger in conversations online. Just as it is not OK for kids to venture too far from home without a parent, they need supervision when venturing beyond the web sites that parents have approved for them.

We need to use our power as consumers to help drive the Internet marketplace. As people choose to use filtered directories and support family friendly web sites, the marketplace will respond by offering more of this type of resource. Sites that many find objectionable will become relegated to their own specialized directories. Supply and demand will ultimately prove to be the most powerful force in setting the tone of what dominates the World Wide Web.